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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KATHMANDU 000751

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SUBJECT: TIBETAN REFUGEES: NANGPA-LA SURVIVOR TELLS HIS STORY

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty for reasons 1.4(b/d).

Summary

1. (C) According to Lhopsang Penjore, a Tibetan refugee who was present at the time, recently provided more details regarding the September 2006 murder of a Tibetan nun by PRC border guards. Penjore told RefCoord on April 10 that the 76-person group was ten days from Lhasa when Chinese armed police shot and killed the young Tibetan nun and fired shots at several others, injuring one in the leg. Penjore was arrested and detained in Tingre and Shigatse prisons for nearly two months. After he was released, Penjore returned to Lhasa and, four months later, began the journey again -- this time on his own. He successfully crossed near the Nepal-China border at Kodari and arrived at the Tibetan Refugee Reception Center in Kathmandu March 27.

Lhopsang Penjore -- A Tibetan Farmer Decides to Flee

2. (C) On April 10, RefCoord interviewed Lhopsang Penjore (please protect) at the Tibetan Refugee Resettlement Center in Kathmandu. Penjore, 30, said he was from a farming family in northern Kham district, the youngest of five children. His family had owned a large tract of arable land, which the People's Republic of China (PRC) had divided and redistributed to several families in 1959. His family grew wheat and barley on their small acreage. Penjore indicated that his village was ethnically Tibetan, but governed by Han Chinese authorities. The relationship between the two groups was "not bad," but that "whatever they (the Chinese) say, we must do." Penjore decided to attempt the perilous trek to Nepal to pay homage to the Dalai Lama; he feared that as he grew older, it would be more difficult to make the journey. Penjore said that he had left his home knowing that he would spend the rest of his life in India.

Impossible to Procure a Passport

3. (C) In July 2006, Penjore departed for Lhasa, where he hoped to obtain a Chinese passport. According to Penjore, if

he were to have applied for a passport in his district, it would have taken one and a half years to receive a reply. Thus, he carried with him to Lhasa his identity card, a letter from the Han Chinese village authorities, and one from the district government. Even with this evidentiary support, Penjore was unable to procure a passport from the PRC in Lhasa. He believed it was because he did not know any of the Chinese authorities personally and was unable to pay the necessary bribe. Chinese applicants, on the other hand, he said, only had to show an identity card to obtain a passport.

The Journey Begins in Lhasa

14. (C) After spending two months in Lhasa, Penjore met a Tibetan guide who offered to take him to Nepal with a group of 75 other Tibetans. They departed Lhasa in mid-September 2006 at night in the back of a large lorry. Penjore recalled knowing one other Tibetan in the group who was from a neighboring village. Ten of the group were children and six or seven were women, he added. The group traveled only at night, he said, as it was very dangerous to travel by day. They spent the first two nights in the back of the truck, which brought them to a village near Tingre. Another vehicle met them in Tingre, roughly 400 miles from Lhasa, and transported them the third night to a remote village from where they had to proceed on foot. On the seventh day, the group ran out of food, which had to be carried individually in rucksacks. Penjore noted that they could not ask for food at nearby villages for fear that a "Chinese spy" would report their presence to the authorities. The Tibetans also knew

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that anyone who helped them could be arrested.

The Incident at Nangpa-La

15. (C) On the tenth day of the journey, the group was traversing the Nangpa La (Nangpa Pass) at over 19,000 feet above sea level between Tibet and Nepal. By this time, Penjore said, they were traveling by day for two reasons: first, crossing the snow and ice was too dangerous at night, and second, they needed to proceed quickly as they were all starving. The large group had also divided into smaller units with some walking faster than others. Penjore reported that he was in a group of fifteen people, roughly in the middle. Penjore's group had traversed across the side of a mountain and had reached the bottom when they heard a shot fired. (Penjore later realized that this was the shot that killed 17-year-old Kelsang Namtso.) A few minutes later, they could see a Chinese army patrol shooting and running toward them. One man in Penjore's group was shot in the leg. The army soldiers, he said, put a gun to the head of one Tibetan man in his group and yelled at everyone, "do not take another step or I will shoot!" Roughly 33 of the group of 76 were arrested. Penjore and the others were handcuffed and escorted back to a waiting vehicle, which also carried the body of the deceased nun. He speculated that someone must have spotted them the day before and reported it to the Chinese authorities.

Incarceration in Chinese Prison

16. (C) The vehicle took the Tibetans two hours away to an army post where they were each interrogated for roughly 30 minutes. Penjore recalled watching the army soldiers photograph the dead nun's body and extract the bullet. Members of the group were asked about the identity of the deceased. The body, he believed, was left at the army camp. The next day, another army vehicle transported the Tibetans to Tingre where they stayed for three days in army detention and one day in a police prison. They were questioned about why they had attempted to leave the country. Penjore noted

that the group was ill fed, given only small amounts of tsampa (traditional Tibetan porridge made of barley) three

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times per day. The soldiers and police also beat the Tibetans with hands and feet, but used no other methods of torture. From Tingre, the group was taken by truck to the Shigatse prison where, Penjore said, there were roughly 300 Tibetans incarcerated. In Shigatse, Penjore stated, the Chinese authorities believed he was a Tibetan monk, or lama, due to his short hair, which was typically worn by monks versus long hair kept by most Tibetan lay people. Because they thought he was a monk, Penjore was required to clean the pig sties and kill the insects inside the prison's greenhouse. After 1 month and 20 days, one of Penjore's relatives was called to the prison and he was released.

Second Journey to Nepal Successful

17. (C) Penjore immediately returned to Lhasa where he stayed with a childhood friend for four months. With financial help from his friend, Penjore decided in March 2007 to attempt the journey to Nepal again, but this time on his own. He paid a truck driver 3,000 yuan (roughly USD 390) to transport him to a place called Dham, near the Kodari border crossing, which is on the heavily guarded main commercial trading route between China and Nepal. At Dham, Penjore found a Nepali guide who agreed to bring him to Kathmandu for 2,600 yuan (roughly USD 335). Penjore arrived safely at the TRRC on March 27 and was expected to depart for New Delhi by bus on April 11.

Background on Transit of Tibetans Through Nepal

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18. (SBU) Between 2,000 - 3,000 Tibetans every year enter Nepal from China on their way to India. The most common reasons for departing Tibet include religious pilgrimage (to see the Dalai Lama or Karmapa), education, or economic opportunity. During the fall and early winter months, most Tibetan refugees transit down to Solukhumbu in Nepal (through the Sagarmatha National Park). During this period, the glaciers have solidified and the passes remain open. During winter, the passes become snowbound, while during the spring and summer months, the glaciers become soft and are extremely treacherous. Thus, at this time of year, most Tibetan refugees transit to Nepal near Dham in Tibet, somewhere close to the Kodari border crossing (often referred to by the name of the nearby Nepali town, Tatopani). As a result, fewer weather-related injuries are seen (such as frostbite), but fewer refugees make it through due to higher security near the border checkpoint.

Comment

19. (C) Penjore's journey from Tibet is fairly typical except for the deadly incident at Nangpa-la in September 2006. Although not an eyewitness, Penjore gave an account of the shooting and its aftermath that appeared genuine. Penjore seemed to have no idea that the shooting had occurred inside Nepal, which other eyewitnesses have suggested. This is unsurprising considering the absence of national demarcation lines in the remote, mountainous terrain. The Chinese authorities treated Penjore and his group less harshly when compared to other accounts of torture in Shigatse that we have heard. With continued reports of discrimination against ethnic Tibetans in China, it comes as no surprise that Tibetans remain willing to take extreme risks and undergo hardship to cross the Himalaya and escape into Nepal.

MORIARTY